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Kremlin May Have Shifted Bull's-Eye

Americans living at the outer limits of obvious Soviet missile targets are less likely to be vaporized in a nuclear exchange, thanks to a significant, highly secret change in the Kremlin's strategic thinking.

Whether their chances of ultimate survival are any better is questionable, of course.

What's happened, according to highly sensitive documents we've seen, is that in recent years the Soviets have lowered the destructive power of their warheads as the accuracy of their long-range missiles has improved.

This suggests to some that the Soviets' intention is to destroy U.S. missile silos without spreading extra destruction and radiation to nearby population centers.

The apparent innovation in Soviet strategic thinking isn't something the Reagan administration has been anxious to publicize.

It might give the impression that the Kremlin leaders have somehow become more benign, and would thus undercut the administration's determination to counter the perceived Soviet threat.

To the layman, the decrease in "yields" or destructive power of nuclear warheads may seem of little more than academic interest, when the world's stockpile has already topped 50,000 warheads, any one of which could cause far more devastation than the primitive bomb that leveled Hiroshima 40 years ago.

But to U.S. strategic planners and Kremlinologists, the Soviet move is significant. The basic figures are summarized in a National Security

Council report, which estimates that "clearly 90 percent of Soviet strategic warheads have yields between 300 and 500 kilotons," a noticeable decline in destructive power.

A kiloton represents 1,000 tons of TNT; the best estimate of the Hiroshima bomb's explosive force is 13 kilotons.

During the decades of escalation to bigger and better missiles, each bristling with multiple warheads that could fan out against separate targets, the TNT tonnage reached unimaginable sizes.

The largest Soviet warhead, put atop a small number of SS18 missiles, was rated at 20 megatons, or 20 million tons of TNT. Most of the SS18s carry 10 warheads of 550 kilotons each.

The United States, aiming more for accuracy than overwhelming destructive power by an individual warhead, was satisfied with a 9-megaton warhead maximum.

According to our calculations from secret U.S. and Soviet data, the average clout of U.S. strategic warheads is now 150 kilotons, compared with the Soviet average of 600 kilotons.

It's plain that the Soviets have a long way to go before they feel confident enough in the accuracy of their missiles to lower their warhead impact to anything near the U.S. average.

This has led some experts to argue that the Soviets don't intend to aim at our land-based missiles, but have instead targeted our cities and industrial complexes, which don't require the pinpoint accuracy necessary to take out a missile silo.